

## **Protecting Workers' Health in a Climate of Change: Policy Options for Action**

### **WHO/ILO Roundtable**

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### **Labour policies and action on OSH during job crisis**

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Let me start by reminding all of us that the ILO and WHO are the only two specialized agencies in the UN system with mandates to protect and promote workers' health addressing occupational health as a whole. Both organizations have undertaken recently a number of important policy initiatives that require thoughtful changes in our way of work towards better protection of workers' health, especially at a time of economic crisis.

Even before the financial crisis, the globalization of the world economy had a radical effect on every economic sector and on every region of the world. It has brought about immense changes in organizations and enterprises. The global financial crisis is having a further impact on the safety and health of workers throughout the world. Limited resources force enterprises to downsize production, cut jobs, lay off workers in large numbers, increase part-time and temporary work, and further out-source their production. As a result of these trends, workers are subject to serious psychosocial risks, especially because of the fear of dismissal and of future unemployment, changes in working time patterns due to irregular working hours, and increased job demands because of the intensification of work.

In addition, enterprises often cut resources allocated for safety and health and lay off safety and health specialists. Enforcement agencies, labour inspectorates and occupational safety and health services have to operate with limited resources. Poor working conditions and dangerous safety and health situations can lead to a sharp rise in work accidents, injuries and fatalities endangering the lives of millions of women and men and causing ill-health in people who have become unemployed. The recent report of the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health clearly stated that unemployment, work insecurity and precarious jobs are associated with poor health conditions. Workers often accept precarious work and jobs in the informal economy, often in low-skilled occupations where safety and health is ignored. They may also become migrant workers. The increase in precarious working conditions will

pose an additional risk for accidents and ill-health in micro-enterprises in the informal economy, where the formal management structure is poor and economic survival is the first priority.

These changes in work patterns and forced restructuring make the management of safety and health difficult. Reduced production reverses the tight schedules and peaks of intensive work in production and services which were prevalent before the crisis. Some employees come under pressure to accept additional workloads and extra hours to compensate for the lack of human and financial resources. Such situations tend to result in additional physical and mental stress and burn-out. Overall, the management of traditional hazards and risks is weakened due to the requirements of necessary reductions in production costs. The incidence of work accidents and diseases is expected to rise because of the present economic crisis, as some companies and governments are tempted to lessen the enforcement of OSH standards.

### **The position of the ILO is clear and firm**

Thus, because of well-known economic difficulties, worker protection may not be found among the priorities for action. But it has never been accepted by the ILO that worker protection should be properly addressed only in times of economic upturn. It is universally acknowledged that a healthy workforce is critical to reaching sustainable economic development. As we all understand, coherent national OSH policies, actions by employers' and workers' organizations and the implementation of labour policies advocated by the ILO and health policies advocated by the WHO are critical to keep social protection high on technical and political agendas.

Social protection must be preserved for the millions of people who have lost, are about to lose or may lose their jobs in the future. While many international organizations and national governments are trying to find effective and sustainable solutions to the problems caused by the current crisis, we must continue to stress what could easily be forgotten during such times but which is part and parcel of the ILO's Decent Work Agenda: the right of everyone to a safe and healthy working environment. This right should not be compromised during times of financial constraints. We need to make sure that the right to a safe and healthy working environment is not eliminated from national and enterprise agendas while waiting for better times. It is precisely this way of thinking that has led the world to where it is today: the

thinking behind the short-term business model. Following this model in the implementation of safety and health rules may backfire in the future. While it is true that the countries of the world should concentrate at the present time on the restoration of sustainable productivity and equity, they need to do this with the full respect of labour standards, including those related to occupational safety and health. Only this will ensure that people live socially and economically productive lives.

This year, the International Labour Conference adopted a Global Jobs Pact to give a new impetus to the implementation of the ILO Decent Work Agenda at a time of economic crisis. The ILO and WHO are also the lead agencies under the UN Joint Crisis Initiative entrusted with the responsibilities for building a social protection floor of essential services and mechanisms to safeguard human development at a time of financial and economic crises.

Social equity, income security, efficient health services and the protection of workers against work-related accidents and diseases are seen as instruments needed to protect jobs and employment and to promote application of international labour standards for better maintenance of safe and healthy working conditions and for better protection of workers' health. To this end, the core of ILO action will continue to be the provision of its international instruments (Conventions and Recommendations) and legal frameworks for developing occupational health policies and programmes and for strengthening national OSH systems on a tripartite basis.

The situation with the provision of occupational health can be seriously exacerbated at a time of crisis. However, we are well equipped to address adequately many continuing challenges that arise in the area of social protection today. The ILO Global Strategy on Occupational Safety and Health has laid the foundation for integrated action that should better connect the ILO's occupational safety and health standards with other means of action, such as advocacy, awareness-raising, knowledge development, management, information dissemination and technical cooperation to maximize impact. The implementation of the Global Strategy gives rise to national tripartite commitments and national actions to foster a preventive approach to the achievement of lasting improvements in safety and health at work. Another powerful instrument for the global action on worker protection is the ILO Convention Concerning the Promotional Framework for OSH, 2006, (No.187). It provides a solid basis for development of comprehensive national OSH policies and programmes with emphasis on specific national

priorities. Despite the crisis, it has already received 12 ratifications to date. Today, we should, more than ever, focus our efforts on the promotion of the guiding principles embedded in these and other ILO safety and health standards adopted by the ILO constituents in order to translate them into practical actions nationally and internationally.

The ILO's comparative advantage lies to a large extent with its social protection objectives. The ILO stands firmly by this core element of its mandate to protect workers against hazards to their safety and health. We believe that only a safe and healthy workforce can build a sustainable economy. Now, at a time of crisis, the world has learned the lesson that it is better to act than to react. It is then high time to apply a preventive approach in all sectors of the economy in order to prevent a truly human crisis.

In closing, I would like to cite Mr Juan Somavia, Director General of the ILO, who has repeatedly underlined that "The current economic crisis should not be an excuse to lessen decent working conditions, but an opportunity to promote them."

Thank you for your attention.